

The Doctrine of Repentance

by Danny Lirette

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Repentance; it's a word which, for some, brings up images of "turn or burn!" placards. For others, it means forgiveness. Still, for others it means to stop doing sinful things in one's behavior. But just what is repentance... from a Biblical standpoint?

First we need to define the word repentance itself. The Greek word for repentance is "metanoeo" and means to change one's mind or purpose; to turn away from sin. (Source: [Vine's Greek Dictionary](#))

Repentance, then, is to have a change of heart *and* behavior concerning sin; it's to turn away from sin in one's heart which then translates into one's conduct. One cannot repent in his or her heart and remain unchanged in the way that they live; it's impossible! The idea that a person can be "saved on the inside" yet live in and practice sin on the outside is nowhere to be found in the pages of the Scripture as we will see.

Repentance is so important and so essential that Jesus said concerning it:

Luke 13:1-5 "About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?" Jesus asked. "Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too."

Without repentance, according to Jesus Christ Himself, a person will be forever lost. We're saved by Grace through faith... but repentance is the key that unlocks the door to faith which in turn unlocks the door to Grace! Without it, the door remains closed and salvation is not obtained. The idea that repentance can be bypassed in the process of Salvation *as well as* sanctification is foreign to the New Covenant. Repentance is not merely a one time act that secures our place in Heaven; it must be a lifelong attitude of heart. This, and this alone, is true Biblical repentance.

Not only is repentance required in order to unlock the door of faith which then unlocks the door to Grace but repentance itself is a gift given by God to undeserving sinners.

In 2 Timothy 2:25 we read, "correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth" (ESV).

So we see that repentance is granted by God. When something is given freely by a good, loving, holy and perfect God, it would do the recipient well not to reject the gift given. Amen?

Now some may be thinking, "How can I know if God has granted me genuine repentance?". The answer lies in this:

True repentance, Biblically defined, is to hate the thing you once loved. People stop sin all the time ... yet haven't repented in a Biblical sense - at least not fully repented. They stop sinning in their behavior because they fear God's judgment; they don't actually hate the sin they were practicing. For example, a person can stop watching pornography because he fears that God will cut him off; but that's the wrong motivation! If he doesn't hate the sexual sin itself then he hasn't repented. To stop outward sin while still loving it inwardly is self deception. Many will stand before God on Judgment Day who stopped sin outwardly but who continued to love it inwardly and they'll not be received into His Presence. Genuine repentance then is to hate what is evil and love what is good which will translate into a passionate joy to please the Lord and your lifestyle actions will reflect that inner change of heart granted to you by God.

While the judgment of God *can* lead a person to genuinely repent, they must never stay in that frame of mind. Instead, they must move from a fear of judgment to a love for God and a hatred of sin.

In fact, Jesus spoke of repenting in one's behavior but still being full of sin on the inside. Let's look at Matthew 23:27 where He said:

Matthew 23:27 "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs--beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity."

Repentance, according to Jesus, was to be clean on the inside - in one's heart. If our actions look good before men yet inwardly we're full of lust, pride, offense and other heart attitudes that God hates, then we haven't repented!

Don't get me wrong or misunderstand what I'm saying. We struggle; there's no doubt about this. Struggling against sin and temptation are a normal part of the Christian Life. Why? Because we now have a new nature; a nature that seeks to please God and obey Him in all things. If, however, we take pleasure in and love sin then we show that we've not repented.

How many professing Christians are among us who don't sin outwardly but on the inside they refuse to forgive those who have harmed them? How many do we have among us who inwardly lust after others or walk in bitterness and offense? These people may look beautiful on the outside, but according to Jesus they're filled with dead men's bones on the inside.

Brothers and sisters, God commands - in the New Covenant - that everyone everywhere turns from sin in their heart and in their actions:

"God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him" (Acts 17:30)

There are some who are being convicted by the Holy Spirit continually over the way they live their lives either inwardly, outwardly or both ... and they continue to refuse to repent. These individuals, if they continue in their resisting the Holy Spirit, will find themselves unable to repent just as Esau was unable to repent at a certain point:

Hebrews 12:16-17 "Make sure that no one is immoral or godless like Esau, who traded his birthright as the firstborn son for a single meal. You know that afterward, when he wanted his father's blessing, he was rejected. It was too late for repentance, even though he begged with bitter tears."

If a person is being called by God to repent and yet chooses to live a godless life after the Holy Spirit has been convicting him continually, a point of "no return" will indeed come to that individual, as we see in the text above, where it is no longer even possible to repent. God withdraws His free gift of repentance from those who reject it over and over and over again. Some ask, "What point is it that that takes place?" and the answer is, "No one knows; only God knows". Thus, we must not delay in repenting and walking in a lifestyle of repentance.

You see, most oftentimes we think of repentance as turning from some outward form of sin yet outward forms of sin are but fruits of what's going on on the inside of our hearts.

Repentance must begin in our hearts where evil dwells:

In Matthew 15:19-20, Jesus says, "For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you."

Sin is a heart issue; the outward actions are the manifestations of what's on the inside of us. If repentance doesn't get to the heart (to the root) then repenting of

the outward actions (the fruit) will not do us any eternal good. We may look good in front of others but God sees the heart and knows what's really going on!

Yes, repentance means that we change our actions but it also means and always - without exception - includes the fact that we repent inwardly; that we change our mind and purpose concerning sin. If we do not repent from the heart then we have not truly repented. We may know the Bible inside and out; we may attend the best church in the church; we may pray several times a day and fast twice a week. If we have not repented from the heart then these religious exercises will profit us nothing!

This then, brings us to the question of "how" we're to respond when the Lord calls us to repent. What are we to do when the Lord calls us to turn from sin inwardly and outwardly?

First, we're to humble ourselves in the Presence of God.

James 4:6 says, "But he gives us even more grace to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but favors the humble."

Notice that God gives grace to stand against evil desires. Who does He give His grace to? The humble. The proud are left without His grace and thus they continue to sin. The evidence that one is not walking in the grace of God is that they are walking in sin!

Next, we're to confess our heart attitudes to God, that we do have a grudge against so and so or that we are full of lust. Whatever the heart attitude, we're to bring it to the Cross of Christ and confess it to the Lord. We do not only confess filthy actions and filthy thoughts; we confess that our hearts are wicked, evil and vile! Only then will the root of the issue - our heart! - be transformed by grace through faith. When we repent in this way, we repent in a way that invites the Lord to move on our behalf. This is the type of repentance that doesn't need to be repented of. There's a sorrow that comes with sin that makes a person feel emotionally bad for how they live and for what they think in their hearts, but it's not a genuine sorrow; it's false and deceptive!

2 Corinthians 7:10 "For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death."

In verse 11 of the same chapter, Paul the Apostle stated, " Just see what this godly sorrow produced in you! Such earnestness, such concern to clear yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such longing to see me, such zeal, and such a readiness to punish wrong. You showed that you have done everything necessary to make things right."

Notice what godly sorrow produced? Genuine repentance! What did this repentance do? It produced godly fruit in their lives; it resulted in their changing their ways and being passionate for the things of the Kingdom of God!

Is your life like that? Have you repented from the heart? Is your inner life pure? Do you hate sin and love righteousness? Do you live a lifestyle of repentance where you're passionate about the things of the Kingdom of God? Is your entire being saturated with honoring and submitting to the Will of the Lord for your life? Do you long for the day that you see Jesus face to face; a day in which temptation will no longer know your name? This, dear friend, is real repentance!

Next and again, we're to repent toward God. This means that we're to repent with God in view. We're not to repent for others, to be seen by them. We're not to repent because we fear Hell or God's wrath. Yes, Hell and God's wrath await those who refuse to repent yet our motivation must be repentance toward God because we love God and hate sin. True repentance means turning from sin in our hearts and actions and then turning towards God and having faith in Jesus Christ:

Acts 20:21 "I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike--the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus."

Repenting from sin and turning towards God implies a change of direction. That's how we're to respond when the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts of sin. We're to repent - turn from that sin in our heart and in our actions - and run towards the Cross. We say, "Yes, Lord! I've sinned and I turn from it in my heart by Your Grace that enables me! I run to the Cross for forgiveness; cleanse me, wash me and restore me again, oh Lord!".

While it was stated earlier that our motivation to repent should not be fearing God's wrath and Hell, it's nonetheless true that when we repent we're running away from God's wrath and Hell:

Mathew 3:5-10 "People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. "You brood of snakes!" he exclaimed. "Who warned you to flee God's coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."

Responding to the conviction of the Holy Spirit when He speaks to our hearts not only causes us to receive God's grace to stand against evil desires, it automatically removes us from God's wrath and from an eternity in Hell. Notice that John the Baptist said, "Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God". Repentance will always be shown by the way we live, yet it's work is performed deep within our hearts as we say "Yes!" to the Lord.

Will we still have temptations? We will. Will we struggle against sin and evil desires? Absolutely. This is why repentance is so important! When we walk in a spirit of repentance, we're always saying, "Yes!" to the Lord and "No!" to sin. By walking in a spirit of repentance, we will always be in obedience to the Lord; not out of fear of Hell but rather out of a love for God and His Holiness.

Have you messed up and sinned? Has the devil whispered lies to you that you've "crossed the line"? You can lay those sins down today and forever silence those lies by repenting. The fact that you repent and turn from sin in your heart and in your actions proves that you've not crossed the line! The devil is a liar and that will be evidenced the moment you turn to God in repentance. I want to encourage you, whoever you are who's reading this, to bow humbly before the Lord and pour your heart out to Him, asking Him and thanking Him for His precious and wonderful gift of repentance in your life. Call out to the Name of Jesus and cry out for mercy; in doing so, God will pour out on your life a spirit of repentance that no devil, no sin and no temptation can ever overcome!